



## One Mississippi by Crowley's.Darling

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**Summary:** Getting involved in a case was what he needed right now. The girl - runaway, strange scars. This was where he needed to be. Away from the thoughts that clawed him whole, away from the memories of Sara. (Stranger Things prequel. Hopper pre-Hawkins PD.)

## 1. Vice

Three suitcases, two rolling book bags, *his* duffel, and a coat his mother bought; the process took her three trips. He hadn't even bothered getting up from the kitchen table, just sat with his cold coffee in front of him, eyes hollow, hands cupped in front of his face. Watching her go wasn't nearly as sweet as all those blues songs made it seem. Two months and she'd already moved on. He'd known she was seeing someone and what was the point in fighting her on it anymore? Who she chose to spread those pretty little legs to wasn't his call anymore. That didn't mean he didn't feel the sting when the guy showed up to grab those suitcases.

When he kissed her, Hopper stood, fists clenched at his side. He went to the dining room table, stared numbly at the wall, didn't bother with a glass for the bourbon, just drank from the bottle. Diane was speaking to him –something about how sorry she was and how she wished him well, how her new number was on the counter and 'feel free to call.' But Hopper didn't blink, didn't budge. Not when she kissed him on the temple and told him he needed to shave his beard and not when that door slammed behind her.

Two months had gone by since Sara and he could still feel the ache of the empty room every time he passed it. Maybe that was why Diane was okay with moving out and leaving him the place: she couldn't take the memories anymore. Must be nice to just walk away from this, he thought. For Hopper, there was no walking away. Every corner of the home held memories. Like the plethora of casseroles they still hadn't eaten, gone stale in the fridge. Why everyone thought a fucking casserole was going to fix anything he didn't know. Besides, he was barely eating anyway.

His sleep was filled with images of Sara. Pretty white lilies all around because they were her favorite, tiny frame sheathed in the pale pink dress that made her look even less vibrant – she'd asked for it specifically that last night he held her hand through the coughing and the fever. They shouldn't make caskets that tiny, it wasn't right.

The ringing in his ears wouldn't stop and he had to be on shift in six hours but he couldn't sleep. He was used to sleeping in a bed alone

by now, that was for damn sure. Between the countless nights of sleeping in a hospital or the ever-so-recent turn of events when his wife just didn't come home. And before that, it was the fighting that left one of them crashed on the couch or sleeping in the bathtub because – damn it – he wasn't sleeping in Sara's room.

Stumbling to the kitchen, Hopper fished through cabinets in search of the next vice. And, ah, there she was: sweet salvation on the kitchen table: Bell's Whiskey. Cheap, but the shit did the trick. He killed the bottle.

...

"Parking duty!? Cap, you're fuckin' with me."

Bright and early Thursday morning, hangover and all, Hop slammed the assignment down on Captain Lark's desk. Third day of parking duty that week. The annoyance in the room was evident from the both of them, but Hopper pushed.

"I don't know what you're so mad about. I'm giving you time, Jim. You need time."

"What I *need* is for you to get your head outta your ass. I'm *fine*."

"You smell like whiskey and I don't think you've washed that uniform in weeks. All your razors broken, hot stuff?"

Hopper growled, shaking his head. "Let me on something. I need something other than fucking parking duty, you hear me? I can't take another damn day of this! Give me *somethin'*."

Larks looked at him, raising a brow. "You finish out this week without another outburst, we'll maybe think of putting you on something."

"Captain?" another officer interrupted them and Hopper didn't even try to make himself disappear. He was hoping for a case and if he was right about the tone, they just picked up a weird one. "Frank just got a call..." the officer paused when noticing Hopper.

"Hop, *out*!" Larks called, tossing tickets toward him. Hopper gave him

the finger before leaving.

Coffee. Mornings needed coffee.

A trip to Gulf was in order. Nothing better for a hangover than a gas station brew.

"Hey, Hop, what's new?" he'd come to know Mr. Wilkins really well in his time in Bloomington. "How're ya holdin' up?"

"Fine. Just fine, Ed. Thanks." He tried not to make eye contact, deciding instead to focus on the missing persons pictured on the plastic that separated them. "Pack 'a Camels while you're at it."

Soft music played over the crappy speakers. He liked this gas station only because no one ever came in it. No one to recognize him and ask how Diane was or talk to him about the funeral and how nice of a service it was or how Sara looked so good. No, she hadn't. Sickness had taken the vibrancy away from his daughter and he'd been fighting like mad to remember that healthy little girl and not the broken shell cancer left behind.

His thoughts were interrupted when he noticed someone else was in there. Young – maybe 20 – pale, tiny. Wrinkled up, torn white shirt falling off her shoulder, scar visible on the white skin. Stealing. Six bags of chips tucked in her shirt which she used as a sort of bag, lifting up to expose more scarred up skin, a few dark stitches torn on her hip. Hopper scrunched his face.

"Ya know I'm standin' right here," he droned, arms crossed over his chest.

And the girl stilled, head shot up in his direction and he saw the dark, bruise-like circles under her eyes. She dropped the chips and ran. The coffee wasn't ready, but the cigs were so Hopper dropped a ten on the counter, grabbed the pack, and ran after her, telling Wilkins to keep the change.

"Hey, stop!" he was a few feet behind her. He had the advantage with longer legs, but she was pretty quick. Not quick enough to dart in front of the semi that was blaring its horn at her. He managed to grab

her around the shoulders and swing her back away from the street. Gasping, Hopper narrowed his eyes at her and caught his breath. "What's your name?" Silence. She tried to wriggle away so he put more pressure on her shoulders and she flinched. "What's. Your. Name."

"Julie," she finally spoke.

Jim stood at full height, still one hand on her shoulder. "You know I should arrest you for stealing." She was quiet, eyes glaring at the dirt below her feet. His fingers itched to grab the cuffs, but his conversation with Larks rang in his head and he really wasn't interested in making the boss happy. The girl looked like she hadn't eaten in days. "I should," he droned on. "but because of you I didn't get my coffee." He glanced up and across the street where Gayle's Diner was. "You hungry?"

Julie looked up at him, mouth open, big brown eyes looking at him like he was playing some awful joke on her.

Hopper didn't want to play nice. He wasn't feeling nice. He was feeling the throbbing of a headache – no doubt from the hangover – a rumbling in his stomach, and now he'd pulled something in his leg from running after her. He'd take her to the station after breakfast. He'd just drop her off, not give a damn. She looked like a long, hard road for someone so young, but she shouldn't have been dumb enough to try stealing in front of a cop.

She tried jumping out of the squad car. Twice. First time he locked it on her, second time she lifted the lock on the door and Hop grabbed her arm. Held it until he parked then took a good look at her.

The jeans she wore were ripped as well, her hair was knotted and falling over her shoulders, a cluster of freckles splayed lightly across her nose. She'd almost be pretty if she'd just clean up.

"You aren't from around here, are ya?" he asked to which silence followed. "Look, this is gonna work swimmingly if ya just answer my damn questions."

"No."

"No?" he raised an eyebrow. "No you're not from around here, or no you aren't answering my questions?" More silence. "Are you hungry or not? And no running or I swear to God I'm booking you now."

Julie managed to stay put while they walked in the diner, didn't run, didn't cause a scene. She looked timid and ashamed at the weird glances she was getting from the patrons and Hop shook his head, agitated.

She spoke to the waitress to order. Voice strong and clear, so he knew she wasn't mute or some shit. And then when it was just the two of them there was silence again. He tried waiting her out – really did – but there were just so many questions and this was no doubt a case and he was willing to *feed a perp* just to have this handed to him.

"Julie," he spoke her name softer now, trying a different approach. She looked up under her eyelashes at him. "What's your last name?"

There was a moment of contemplation, but she pursed her lips, hung her head, sighed, and looked back before saying, "Preston."

His mind scanned through the names he'd read just moments before he saw her, wondering if there was a missing persons on her. But he couldn't remember a Julie Preston.

"Where are you from?"

"Are you starting a file on me right now?" she asked, tightening her fists on the table.

"No. No, slugger, put those away," he nodded to her hands then sat back as the waitress approached and poured him his much awaited coffee. Julie took some too and he noticed she drank it black. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five." She sipped the drink, humming softly. Shit, she looked young. Twenty, he'd thought originally. He noticed she didn't mention her hometown. "And who are you?"

"Officer Hopper," he pulled out a bottle of pills, downed two of them. "Are you ever gonna tell me where you're from?" This was the third time he was asking.

"Mississippi," she spoke quietly.

"Mind tellin' me why you look like Hell? Better yet why ya stealing?"

She scoffed, looking away. "You don't really know how to talk to women, do you?" Hopper almost dropped the pills out of his mouth at her bluntness.

"Are you fuckin'-" but she held up a hand and cut him off.

"You're on the job and I'm sure your supervisor would love to hear that dirty mouth you have when you talk to a lady." She raised an eyebrow.

Hopper sat straighter. "A *thief*," he corrected. "I liked you better when you didn't speak."

She laughed at that and he noticed that her smile was the only really pretty thing about her. "I get that a lot."

"I imagine," he huffed, pulling out the pack of smokes he bought, unwrapping them, then tapping it twice before slipping a cig out of the pack and between his lips. He held it there while he pocketed them again and pulled out a light. She looked at him, surprised. "You smoke?" he was about to extend the pack to her but she held up her hand and shook her head. Slipping it between his fingers, he exhaled through his nose then slid the ash tray closer. "You a runaway?"

Another long pause followed that comment and Hopper was almost getting used to this. "In a way." She fidgeted in her seat and glanced out the window nervously, doing a double-take to which Hopper followed. Her eyes were on a blue Sedan but she looked back at him quickly and he couldn't help but stare at the scared expression on her face.

"So you're runnin' from *somethin'*." He nodded at that, tapping the ashes off. "Crazy ex-boyfriend?" he assumed that was the case, as it usually was with a twenty-something girl who looked like Hell. But they usually brought a suitcase and they were usually hiding out at a friend's place until things simmered down. And then he remembered the scars and stitches adorning what little he'd seen of her body. "He



get hands-y? Knock you around?"

She went straight-faced again, mouth a hard line, jaw clenching and unclenching. Her back was to the kitchen, but her head snapped in the direction of the waitress who literally just walked out with their food. She was busy staring at the blueberry pancakes and the hash brown casserole, but her hand jutted out just in time to grab the bottle of syrup that tumbled from the waitress' tray. She placed it before Hopper like it was nothing, then began eating.

There was nothing else to say between their bites of food, so Hopper tried to enjoy the silence but his mind kept drifting.

"We'll go to the station after this."

She stopped chewing, swallowed hard, and shook her head slowly. "Please, please don't."

"You should'a thought 'a that before you tried stealing in front of a cop."

"No, you don't understand. Don't take me there. Don't tell anyone you found me."

Hopper stopped eating, sipped his coffee slowly. "You do realize it's my job." She stilled, nodding slowly. The pure fear on her face made Hopper stop mid-chew. "Are you running from a cop? From one of us?" It wouldn't be the first time an officer went abusive on a woman and he didn't know much about any of the young guys so it was plausible. He waited for her answer but she gave him a small shake of the head before taking tiny bites of food. "Fuck..." he muttered under his breath, running his hand down his beard.

Julie bit her lower lip, looking out the window for a few minutes. "Is your coffee good?" she asked quietly and Hopper almost didn't hear her, but he nodded.

"Yep. Better than gas station coffee so I guess this all worked out." He wiped syrup from his mouth. "Look, I wanna help you, but you gotta give me a little too. Okay?"

She just stared a moment, pondering that before nodding stiffly. "I'll

try."

"Good."

When the waitress came back, Julie asked where the ladies room was. With her gone, Hopper glanced toward his truck then paused mid-bite, tossing down his napkin as soon as she walked off. He waved down the waitress while chugging his coffee, paid for their meal, and made his way to his truck. Leaning against the hood, he crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes, waiting to see Julie.

Sure enough he watched the woman climb out of a window. He was sure she'd hurt herself in that fall, but she landed like a cat, glancing around before standing at full height and brushing herself off.

"Just full of surprises aren't you?" he called, arms still crossed, hoping she wouldn't run again. *Fuck, don't run.*

He watched her throw her head back in frustration, but turn on her heels and walk the opposite direction. Hopper jogged toward her, the sun doing nothing for his migraine. He pulled her on the shoulder once again and she seethed but he was adamant and maybe a little too curious for his own good. Fingers splayed out in innocence, he sent her a look before pulling her shirt collar down over her shoulder, the way it was when he first noticed her. There, in one solid white line, was a scar that went shoulder blade to collarbone and then back again in the form of a jagged 'z'.

She pulled away with all her strength and sent a warning glance at the officer, sliding her shirt back to its proper place.

"I don't have an ex-boyfriend," she admitted.

"Then wha-"

Her eyes glanced around before she did the most curious thing: she took his hand in hers and stared him in the eye. "Can I trust you? Can we talk somewhere...quieter?"

Hopper was taken aback. Though there were no people around, he could feel the intensity of the moment and decided that he had nothing to lose. He was wasting the day chasing this girl and not

writing tickets, but the only person who would give a damn was the Captain and he wanted to stick it to him like no other. Getting involved in a case was what he needed right now. Not mindlessly writing tickets. This. The girl. Runaway. Strange scars. *This* was where he needed to be. Away from the thoughts that clawed him whole.

So he sat her in the front seat of his truck and cursed himself for his stupidity. But she looked more frightened than determined. That blunt little spitfire in the diner was long gone as she tensed up, eyes taking in every inch of his squad car. If she meant to try anything, she'd have done it by now.

"You lookin' for somethin'?"

"This thing isn't bugged is it?"

"What? No," he said flatly.

She nodded stiffly, apparently content with his reaction "I just...can't trust police with this I don't think."

"With what?"

"Who do you answer to?"

What a strange question. "Uh...the Captain if I'm feelin' straight-edge, I guess."

She pondered this. "And who does he answer to?"

"I'm not seeing where this is goin' so..." he reached to start the engine but her hands were against the sleeve of his uniform.

"Last time I went to the cops, bad things happened."

He dropped his keys in his lap. "'Bad things'?" he repeated. "What kind of things?"

Julie was silent again, almost as if she'd lost her nerve and Hopper was trying to be patient, he was, but if this was some kinda gang-related thing it'd be out of his hands and Captain Larks would put it

on the plates of his suck-up fuck buddies Rick and Alan. Again.

"They took me back."

"They?"

She nodded stiffly. "Please, just take me somewhere safe."

And maybe it was the hangover talking or the desperate innocent look in her eyes or his own pure curiosity or the fact that he was pissed at Larks. Whatever the case may be, his house was six blocks away and he drove her there without another word spoken.

## 2. Desist

Julie Preston was the first person in his house since Diane left. He'd turned down every friend who invited themselves over. Diane was closer with most of their friends – he never called them just to check up in the way she always did and his work schedule and Sara's treatments had taken so much out of him, he rarely went out. He assumed anyone who wanted to see him was either interested in bearing witness to his downward spiral or checking in just to repeat their findings to Diane.

"Do you live alone?" Julie's question woke him from his thoughts.

"Yeah," he left it at that. Closing the door behind them, he took a look around and saw the mess for the first time. "Shit, I..." he scratched the back of his neck.

"No, it's okay," she assured him, but he felt awkward when she took the place in again.

Hopper stared at her a moment. "You want some clothes?" she blinked at him. "I...dunno what I got that'll fit, but I can take a look." She didn't reply but she followed him to the bedroom which made him uneasy. His and Hers closets in the master. His, full. Hers, empty. But he was hoping Diane left something, though she was bigger than Julie. His search came up empty. Not even a tank top. "Gonna be big on you, but at least it ain't ripped up," he reached in his drawer and tossed a wife beater at her, a pair of basketball shorts followed after. She stood dumbfounded, looking around his room which agitated him to no end. "You casing the place? Take what you want. I got nothin'." He slammed the door behind him, expecting her to change.

Pining for a cigarette he remembered it was *his* place now and he could smoke inside if he wanted. So he did. Opened a window, lit up, stared out at one of his neighbors moving a mattress onto a box truck. Must be nice to move on, he thought.

"Thank you," came Julie's voice from the hallway and Hopper glanced her way. The shorts went down to mid-calf; she no doubt knotted them as tight as they could go, and she was swimming in his shirt but

she looked a lot more relaxed.

"She speaks," he remarked, tapping the ashes of his cigarette into a tray. "You keeping those scraps for a souvenir or you pitching 'em?" he motioned to the clothes in her hand.

She tensed. "They're all I have."

He stood, towering over her and he thought he saw her flinch, but he took the torn up shirt and made the decision for her, looking over the jeans. "Washing machine's down the hall. These'll work for now."

"For now?" she asked to which he just nodded, leaving her alone while he tossed the holy jeans on the dryer. She followed and he sensed she was afraid to be alone. When she reached Sara's room, Hopper turned back and grabbed the door handle, pulling it toward him with full force and slamming it closed.

"No one else is here. You can relax now. Whatever you're runnin' from, it ain't here." She swallowed hard at the loud noise and he softened with a sigh. "Want a drink?" those big brown eyes were looking at him again. "Takes the edge off."

"Yes."

And she followed him to the kitchen. He dug through the refrigerator for Diane's wine. "I got white, red, whiskey, rum...What do ya like?"

She shrugged, sitting at the kitchen table and pulling her legs underneath her. "I haven't had alcohol in seven months."

Hopper's eyebrows rose. "You went sober?" at her age?

"No. Just haven't had any since..." and her sentence drifted off, her eyes fell to the floor.

"The hard stuff then," he put Diane's wine away and pulled out some whiskey, grabbing glasses for the first time in weeks and pouring them both two fingers. A soft smile came to her lips and she looked up at him. "What?"

"Aren't you on the job?"

Hopper nodded. "Never stopped me before." She sipped her drink and he watched as she crinkled her nose at the burn. "I could pour you wine if..."

"This is fine," she told him and he realized this was the most conversational she'd been. "Do you like your job?"

He pondered this. "Most days. Some days..." he paused, putting out his cigarette. "Listen, I know you don't wanna talk and that just makes my job *peachy*, but I need to know if you're in trouble still."

"I am."

"Who are you in trouble with?"

She stared him in the eyes. "I don't know who they are."

"You were kidnapped," he suggested, speaking something that'd been on his mind for a half hour at least. She nodded silently. "How long ago."

"Seven months." And now the alcohol comment made sense.

"So there must be a missing persons..." he thought out loud.

She finished her drink. "It's been very nice of you to take time out of your day and try to help me, but I need to go now. It's not safe." She stood quickly but he grabbed her wrist. "For both of us," she continued, attempting to pull away.

"That's cute 'an all, but I can handle myself." He finished his drink with the other hand then stood at full height. "I can't trust you to stay put while I go down to the station so you're tagging along."

"But..."

"But nothing, Julie. Non-negotiable. Let's go." He pulled her a little but stopped to open up the front door and she ran face-first into his arm. "Keys," he pointed to the table beside her and she glared but followed through with his request, shoving them in his open palm. "You don't have to be so pissed about this. I'm trying to help."

"By taking me right to them," she nodded. "Some *help*."

Hopper pulled her through the door, closed and locked it, then dragged her to the back of his truck. She stood, looking up at him with defiance while he wondered if it were someone in the department she was scared of. Couldn't be, right?

"Am I gonna have to pick you up or are you gonna work with me for once?" He stared right back, unfazed. When she jumped in the backseat, he grabbed his cuffs and clasped them around her right wrist. "See, wasn't that easy?"

Her eyes widened and she pulled her arm back, extending her other hand in a sort of punch that didn't do anything but piss Hop off more. He attached the other cuff to the grab handle on the ceiling and closed the door on her. Moving slowly to the driver's side, he eased himself in and started the truck.

"You're unbelievable," she mouthed at him.

"I get that quite often, sweetheart, now keep quiet so Officer Hop can drive, alright?" Not another word from her, but he felt the need to remind her that he was just making a phone call for her missing persons report and he'd be right back. The station wasn't far, but the whole ride he kept running through faces of new officers.

"Don't make that phone call," she said right before he got out of the car. He paused, stooping a little to peek in the backseat.

"You don't wanna be found," he noted. "Gotta admit, this is a first." And he slammed the door and locked it.

"Hop, funny seeing you back so soon," Alan's smug face greeted him as he walked in the station. "What's the matter, injured on the job? Papercut from so many tickets?"

"Not in the mood, jackass." Hopper sat down at his desk, narrowing his eyes at a sheet of phone numbers until he hit Pam Scoleski. Punching the digits in with his knuckle, he fiddled for a pen and pad of paper. "Yeah, Pam, hey. Need you to pull somethin' up for me. Quick, too. Like...by three today if possible...yeah, I know you've got



other things, but uh..." he glanced up to see if anyone was listening and found Rick escorting Julie into the building. "Shit...lemme call you back." He hung up, standing quickly and almost knocking the chair over. "Hey, what..."

"Oh, what, look familiar? Little gem you left alone in your truck, there, Hopper." Rick spoke. The closer he got to him, the stronger the smell of smoke was and Hopper almost kicked himself for leaving the windows open enough for him to see in. He noticed Rick had uncuffed her from the truck just to cuff the other hand. "Afraid Lark's gonna pass her off to one of us?"

Yes, that was it exactly. By now Hopper was fuming. "She's with me," was all he managed through his anger.

"Yeah, well do your damn job!" Rick hollered across the room.

Hopper's fists clenched at his sides and he took two steps forward – two – before Lark's office door opened and he came out screaming.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Hop's hiding perps, apparently," Alan spoke.

Lark sighed, shaking his head. "What's your name, Miss?" No response. The annoyance on Lark's face made Hopper bite back a laugh. "You're being spoken to, damn it, *answer* me. What is your name?"

Julie looked unfazed, expression not changing in the slightest. She looked reckless and agitated and Hop had a sudden level of respect for her.

"This is ridiculous," Rick exclaimed. "Hop. Spill."

"Look, it's nothin' at all. Just brought her in to scare her a little bit. She started grabbing food from the gas station, but didn't take anything. No weapon on her, nothin'." He spoke slow and clear, not taking his eyes from Julie who stared back and looked suddenly relieved. "Just...I got it." He assured everyone.

"Why does she look like that?" Alan asked.

Larks stepped closer to her. "This isn't a game. Attempted robbery and failure to comply with an officer, you should be taken to booking."

"Julie Preston. My name's Julie Preston."

"And who were you calling, Jim? Her parents?" Larks asked.

Hopper shrugged. "Just Pam..."

Suddenly Captain's eyes narrowed and he stepped into his office. Moments later, he heard him on the phone. Hopper watched Julie pull her arm from Rick's hold and in turn he shoved her toward Hopper.

"Jesus, you sure find the biggest *bitches*."

"Please don't let it happen again," she whispered to Hopper, eyes unblinking, ignoring Rick's comment.

"Let what happen?" he said in the same low voice. "Julie..."

Larks entered the room again, mouth a hard line. "Hop. Miss Preston. My office. Now."

The long walk to the office was not the first of the past few weeks. Hopper had been getting written up almost weekly: not showing up for shifts, drinking on the job, misconduct, punching the mayor's treasurer in the face...the list went on.

When the door closed behind him, he saw how it made Julie jump. Her eyes were scanning the room for an escape, he could tell, but with those cuffs on she was going nowhere.

"I've been informed that you've been missing for some time now, Jules," Larks shifted his weight, leaning against the edge of his desk.

"It's Julie," she corrected.

He raised his hands, pursing his lips. "Your parents will be happy. And you'd think you'd be grateful for Officer Hopper finding you." Silence. "Pam is getting your family's phone number as we speak. And

then you're going to call them." Julie stiffened and held her breath.

Hopper broke the tension in the room. "Look, Larks, these cuffs really necessary?"

"I suppose not."

He nodded, taking out his key and trying to catch her eyes as he unlocked them. With them off, she rubbed her wrists and kept her eyes on the office floor. The phone rang which finally drew her gaze to him. Pure fear was stricken across her features and Hopper almost asked her what was going on. Larks answered the call and spoke but her eyes were searching his face for some kind of recognition. Hop had none. All he knew was that she believed something bad would happen as soon as they made that phone call. But Larks was already dialing the number.

"Hello, is this Mrs. Preston I'm speaking with?" a pause. "Yes, hi. This is Dan Larks, Captain of the Bloomington Police Department. I'm sitting here with your daughter."

Hop lost her attention, but he didn't take his eyes off of her. The reaction when she heard her weeping mother on the other line made him look away though. It was too close to home – wishing he could speak with his daughter again. And then Julie was on the phone, face back to her stony expression.

"Hi, mom. Yeah, I'm alright...no, don't come get me. I'll...I'll make it to you," she looked up at Larks. "I need you to be safe right now." She wasn't speaking very much and Hopper noted the protective tone she used, each statement calculated. "Me? Yeah, no, I'm...I'm safe. Okay, well I should go...love you too."

She slammed the phone down after that and it was refreshing to see her get angry, though Hopper didn't know how Larks would take it.

"Okay, now down to the nitty gritty: who took you?"

"My ex-boyfriend," she answered simply, staring him straight in the eye. Hopper tried not to let his anger get the best of him. She'd lied to him. He'd thought this was something bigger and she *lied*; played him

like a fucking fiddle. She answered every damn question Larks asked, no hesitation. Larks would get the credit for a job well-done while Hopper would get played as the jackass who cuffed her in the back of his squad car.

"Abusive ex. Keeps you in some cabin his father owns down on Elmer and 79th, by Gayle's Diner, seven months, you get out." Larks was writing it all down and Hopper paused a minute, rehashing the statement in his head. Something didn't add up. "We'll get you a bus ticket back home, okay?" At least an eight hour bus ride...

There was talk about one of the secretaries going and buying her some clothes while she showered at the station. Larks was busy calling the bus station when Hopper snuck out, gunned it to Elmer again, and drove around until he found 79th. He was right – nothing there but an empty lot, a few food places, and a laundromat. The street wasn't long by any means. She'd said she wasn't from around here, so maybe she didn't know any other streets but the one she stumbled on and found the gas station. Maybe she hadn't been lying to Hop after all.

He drove around one last time for a good look, but didn't see a damn cabin anywhere – and he knew that area pretty well considering Boomer's Bar was right around the corner. Many nights had he parked his truck on 79th and slept off a buzz.

Back at the station, he found that Rick and Alan were gone but a few rookies had replaced them. Larks was on the phone in his office and maybe Hop should have been more discrete about it, but he stormed right into that bathroom to confront Julie.

"Jesus!" Julie screamed, concealing herself with the towel all too late. Hopper had gotten a nice view of her tits before she turned. His cheeks heated up while he stared at her, back facing him. One of the secretaries must have come through with the clothes. She wore a pair of jeans, no doubt some frilly panties were under them. The bra and shirt were draped over the chair in the corner and as she went to grab them, arm covering her breasts, Hop noticed more scarring down her back. On her spine.

"Boyfriend did a real number on ya, huh?" he took a few tentative

steps forward and she turned toward him now, as if her bare chest wasn't the more intimate part of her anymore. He really tried not to look, but they were *there* and he was a man, after all. "See I just took a drive to Elmer and 79th and there's no cabin there." She was silent. He took two more steps. "You weren't lying to me, you were lying to Larks."

She put her shirt on quickly, assuming that would be the fastest way to cover herself, but Hop could see those pert little nipples poking through the fabric. He cleared his throat and forced himself to stop staring.

"I'm just trying to protect you guys."

"Well, that's kind of you, but we can handle ourselves."

She shot him a look. "Not from these people, you can't. This is so much bigger than your little station."

"So tell me," he urged as she reached for the bra, ripped the tag off it, slid her shirt up just enough to squeeze her arms out then slide the bra on, never turning her back to Hopper so he could get a better look at those scars.

"I don't have all the answers, Jim."

"No, I expect you don't. But you have some. So start spilling." It was foreign for him to be called by his first name – even in high school everyone just called him 'Hop.'

She pulled the shirt down and looked up at him, attempting to be intimidating but at her height she wasn't even close.

"Give me that bus ticket and let me go. I gave you what you wanted. They'll leave you alone. Drop it." She pushed passed him, shoving her feet into a pair of new chucks and turning to glance in the mirror, running her fingers through her hair. Hopper looked at her. Compared to the woman he saw in the gas station, she looked completely different. Washed hair and face and some clean clothes did her wonders. "Thanks for your hospitality in your home. Just... watch your back, Jim." She spoke this last part quieter before

opening the door and taking her leave.

Hopper slammed his hand against the wall. This was *bigger* than them, she'd said. *'These people'...*

He needed answers.

### 3. Tropism

Hopper wasn't the least bit surprised when Alan agreed to take Julie to the bus station. He was also unfazed when Larks ordered him to do paperwork for the rest of his shift. Took the captain five minutes before he received a phone call and that office door was closed again. As soon as he was out of eye-shot, Hopper was grabbing his hat and making his way to the front door.

The bus station was ten minutes from there, so he figured if he really punched it he could make it shortly after Alan did. The guy drove like a grandpa anyway so he figured he'd make it – probably have time to smoke a quick cigarette too.

He did; made it there a few minutes after Alan, sat in his truck to watch Alan go to open her door – now that she wore decent clothes and brushed her hair. Only Julie didn't seem flattered. She shoved the door open before he got to it and hopped out. They had a few words then she hoisted her bag over her shoulder and walked toward the entrance.

Hopper put out his cigarette then; got out of the car and started toward the building, making sure to stay unnoticed by both Julie and Alan. Once inside, he tailed her. She looked shifty, but she did make it toward a bus. Then she paused and scanned the area, glanced back at her ticket. For a moment, Hopper believed she was actually going home. And then she tossed out her ticket as soon as she passed a trashcan.

"Officer? Officer, he just took my wallet!" A woman wailed.

"Uh..."

"Officer!" she screamed, pointing toward a tall man who looked alarmed.

When Hopper looked back toward Julie, he lost her for a second. Glancing around quickly, he found her again so he started walking, mind on a mission.

"What are you doing!? Help me!" the woman screamed and that was the wailing that Julie heard. She looked behind her, saw Hopper, and took off running toward the exit on the opposite side of the building.

"Fuck," Hop huffed under his breath.

For the second time that day he took off in a full-out run after some girl. It was getting old.

With the woman still screaming behind him, everyone was startled and standing and in his damn way. He didn't even try to scream after her, there was no use. But when he made it out the door he had to pause to figure out which way she went. Judging by the crazy stares people were sending to his left he took a wild guess. Rolling his eyes, he cracked his back then started running again. Around the corner she was weaving in and out of people, probably trying to lose him and he was so damn out of shape...

"Jules, come *on*..." he gasped. "Where are you gonna go?" She suddenly stopped dead which gave Hopper time to catch up. He grabbed her by the shoulder then; pushed her up against the brick of the building, narrowed his eyes at her. "I don't get what the Hell you think you're doing but this is the thanks we get for sticking our neck out for you? You ditch the bus and toss the ticket? Kid, that's just *low*." His voice is laced with anger and maybe he was pushing on her a little too hard considering their height and weight difference but it'd been a damn bad week and this was the icing on the freaking cake.

"Jim, please," she cried desperately, attempting to see behind him but only seeing his shoulder. "Jim," she was crying then, *actual* tears falling from her eyes and Hopper thought it was *real* impressive how she could just lay on the waterworks.

"Tears aren't gonna work..."

"Look," she whispered, pointing behind him. As her hand fell to rest on his shoulder, he glanced behind him but kept his hold on her. A blue sedan drove by slowly. Her fingers dug into his uniform and he heard her breaths come out as gasps. The silence jogged his memory of the diner that morning when she'd been staring at a similar blue



sedan. Slowly he turned his attention back to her only to find her a sobbing mess.

His eyes softened, a short sigh leaving him before he took his pressure off. But he kept one hand gripping her shoulder just in case she decided to run. Instead, she seemed to be hiding, letting his large frame block the view of the car. Still crying, he noted. He wanted to see if the car was still there, but didn't want to be too obvious so he slowly turned his body, changing which hand held her and keeping her hidden behind him. The car was out of sight.

"Okay, are you ready to come with me now?" he asked her. Big dark eyes looked up at him, tears brimming, but a defiance still behind the sadness. She nodded. "Good," he answered simply, but he still didn't trust her to walk beside him and *not* run so he took her arm in his hand. Silently she looked up at him, still fearful. "I ain't takin' ya back, if that's what's going through your head."

"Sure looks like it," she whispered, glancing behind her, pausing in her movements and searching for that car again.

Hop sighed, shaking his head then moving his hand to the small of her back and urging her to walk. He was tempted to cut through the building, but didn't want to deal with the lady who'd been robbed, who he'd ignored. Ooh, if Larks heard about that one...

"We're just gonna get in the truck and talk, okay?" he spoke lowly. "No cuffs. I'll even let you ride shotgun." They were walking quickly because he still hadn't seen that car again and he was pretty sure it was connected to her kidnapping – whatever happened – her reaction could have either been a ploy or the real thing. With this woman, he couldn't decide.

They made it to the truck and he got her in before he saw the sedan again. It was parked two aisles down. Sliding behind the wheel of his truck he mindlessly pulled out his pack of cigarettes and watched to see if there was any sign of someone in the car.

"Jim," Julie took the pack from his hand, pulling his attention back to her. "Drive. Get out of here. We have to get out of here." The tears weren't there this time, but her voice sounded like she was on the

verge again. So he let the cigarette stealing slide. For now.

He peeled out of the lot, glancing at her after a minute. She was clutching onto the Camels for dear life, wide-eyed, knitted-brow look on her face.

"You gonna take one or just crush 'em all?"

"Sorry." And he was surprised when she removed one from the pack. She handed the box back to him and at the next red light, Hopper took his lighter from his breast pocket and lit the cigarette for her.

She coughed the first drag, but soon was puffing on it like it was nothing.

"Julie, I need-"

"-answers, I know Jim." She nodded, exhaling the smoke out of her nose. "I know. I'm getting there." He waited her out, driving around aimlessly until he figured out what he was going to do. "I told you I don't really know who they are."

"Okay, well are they a gang?"

"No."

"But it's a group of people."

"A lot of people work there."

"Where?"

"I don't know," she snapped at him. They were both silent a tick. "They knocked me out when they took me and then I only saw the inside of the building."

"Building? Not a house?"

She shook her head, tapping the ashes out the open window. "Nothing like that. It was stuffy – like a hospital or something."

"In Bloomington?"

"Probably not. It took a while for me to get here and I crossed a few city lines..." she held her breath. "My goal was to get away, not look for answers. I'm sorry, I should've..."

Hopper glanced over at her, feeling sorry suddenly. "No. No, I...it's alright." He returned his eyes to the road. "These...people...what did they look like? What were they wearing?" He was hoping for some kind of uniform or badge or embroidered symbol – *anything*, really.

She thought a minute. "There were a lot of people there. But most of them wore these coats...like lab coats. White. The rest were in suits."

The more she answered the more confused Hopper got. It seemed like it was a hospital. And with the scars on her body... if the missing persons report hadn't shown up, he would have thought she'd just been tripping on medication and she was actually in for treatment.

"What about whoever took you? Were they there too?" he asked her, hoping to clear this up.

She stilled then, pulled her legs up on the seat and took another drag from the cigarette. "I've only seen him twice."

"Okay..."

"Once when he took me, and again after I escaped last time."

Hopper almost jammed on the breaks. "*Last time*?" he quoted. "How many times have you gotten away?"

"Twice."

"And he watched you go last time?"

She shook her head. "He caught me again after I ran." She took another drag of the cigarette. "He drives a blue sedan."

As soon as it clicked, Hopper pushed the pedal down harder. "And you went to the police last time you got out?"

She nodded but he wasn't looking. "Yeah. They called in for my missing persons and soon after the chief got a call and the blue sedan

pulled in the parking lot. I thought it was someone to take me home, but as soon as he walked in..." she shook her head and breathed deep as if she were back in that moment – reliving it. "I don't know if they were listening in on the phones or what, but they got there pretty quick. I've always wondered if they paid off the police or something. These are powerful people, Jim."

"Where was this?"

"The station was in Muncie." She waited for another question, but Hopper was busy taking it all in. "I'm sorry for being such a bitch before. I was just hoping that you'd leave well enough alone and when you didn't, I assumed that was the way to get you off my trail."

He snorted. "Right. Well, I get it. You're right to not trust the cops after that."

She was staring at him and suddenly he felt transparent. He could see the gears turning and he knew she had questions, but he wasn't going to answer them. "But you're different." It wasn't a question.

He didn't look at her. "Call it a distraction."

"From?"

A long string of silence followed. She put out her cigarette and left it in the ashtray with the others. "We need to get you somewhere safe," he decided. "Your parent's house? Mississippi?"

She nodded. "I don't think they know where my parents live. When they took me, the address on my ID was my apartment."

"They're powerful, they could still get ahold of your records," Hopper mentioned. She tensed. "How long were you out last time?"

"Twenty-two hours."

"And how long has it been now?"

"Four days and..." she glanced at the clock on the radio. "Six hours."

Hopper figured if they were going to hurt her mother, they would do

it no matter what. Not to mention that phone call. If they could tap into phone lines, who knew what else they could manage.

"I'm gonna get you back home and then we'll take it from there." Just before she could answer, his walkie went off. "Oh, shit..." he groaned, giving it a moment before answering. "Cap, I...I'm real sorry. Yeah, got a crazy stomach bug. Gonna be out for a little while." Julie looked nervous at the screaming Larks was doing. "Oh, have Rick cover my parking duty if you want. It's important police business." He shut the damn thing off after that, not wanting to hear the griping or the 'you're fired'. It was coming. He knew it was and this was probably the last straw, but damn it he didn't care anymore. It was a good run in that damn crapshoot while it lasted. He'd been thinking about getting out of the city anyway. Too many memories of Sara.

"I hope you don't get in trouble."

"Fuck them," he sneered. "Honestly. Parking duty right after my..." he stopped himself from finishing that statement. Quiet settled between them once again, but this time it wasn't uncomfortable. He noticed she started dozing after ten minutes or so. Turning on the radio woke her, which he didn't mean to, but he couldn't stand driving in silence. "You can hop in back, get some sleep."

She shook her head at his suggestion. "I'm fine up here." He figured it was because she didn't trust him and who was he to blame her? Roles reversed, he'd be slamming coffee like crazy just to stay awake.

But exhaustion must have crept up on her and he wondered how much sleep she'd gotten in the four days and six hours that she'd been free.

## 4. Cascade

"You should really get some sleep," came a voice that broke him out of his mindless driving.

"Yeah, right. Uh..." he cleared his throat and shifted slightly in his seat, realizing that he'd lost feeling in his ass. A quick glance in his side mirror as he merged to the exit lane and he realized she'd been staring at him. "This isn't another way to give me the slip, is it?"

"What?"

"You're not getting your own room."

"This is ridiculous."

"Tough," he growled. "Look, you need my help but you still seem flighty."

"Well there's gonna have to be some type of trust established, huh? You're gonna be asleep sometime. And then what're you gonna do? Cuff me to the bed?"

Hop grunted, eyes scanning the road for the nearest motel. Close to freeway access, not too expensive, but hidden.

He was soon paying for a room and ignoring the glares Julie was sending him as he unlocked the door to what had to be the shittiest motel room in the history of ever. The two of them stood at the foot of the bed not making eye contact, not speaking.

"I'll take the chair," he finally voiced, shifting away from her. Julie gave him a look as he scooted the two torn up leather chairs to face each other.

She started peeling back the covers of the bed and he glanced her way before undoing his belt and tossing that to the floor. Quickly, he untucked and unbuttoned his shirt and hung it over the back of the chair. Now in a wife beater and his slacks, he gazed over at Julie who was standing before him with a pillow and the bed comforter in her arms.

"It'll get cold," she mentioned.

Tomorrow they needed to get clothes. It was bad enough he was driving around in the police cruiser this far out of their jurisdiction, but to only have the uniform to wear? Bad plan.

He wondered if she actually planned to sleep, but didn't voice his question as she was already under the covers of the bed, shimmying out of what he assumed were her pants. Hop bit his tongue. Jaw clenched, mind wandering, he set the pillow against the back of the chair and sat down. For a brief moment he let himself relax, but soon he was scooting the chair toward the door with an awful sound.

"You're kidding me," Julie groaned when she noticed his plan. "I'm not leaving."

"Right, right, I get that. Can't be too cautious." He was bullshitting her. He didn't believe that she wouldn't attempt to leave. So placing his whole body in front of her only way out was his best option. The door was drafty, but he had the comforter she'd given him. Peachy.

She turned off the light and neither of them spoke another word.

...

Hopper was in that half-awake-half-asleep state, having just been startled awake by yet another fucking nightmare. There was a weight on his legs and he couldn't shake the feeling that this was *happening* and *very real*, not a flitter of his subconscious.

Eyes wide open, Hopper jumped slightly at the sight of a body directly in front of him. Julie: hand reaching for the door beside him which was cracked open, legs straddling his, a determined look plastered across her face.

"What, in God's green Hell...?" his voice was groggy and he was trying to sound pissed but he sounded more confused than anything.

At his voice, Julie got startled and lost her balance on her tiptoes, toppling down on Hopper with an 'oof' and staring down at him like a deer in the headlights. With her on his lap now, Hopper was wide awake and well-aware of his morning wood.

"Uh...I can explain. I was going out to get us some coffee."

He shifted slightly in a poor attempt at pulling his hips away from her. "And how, exactly were you planning on *paying* for that coffee?"

Julie pulled her hand from behind her back, sheepishly revealing his wallet. How she'd gotten it from him Hopper didn't want to know.

"Okay, enough," he snatched it back, pushed at her hips as he stood, and pocketed his wallet. "Let's go."

She watched him put his belt on then turned to grab his keys while he slid his arms through his shirt sleeves.

"Where even are we?" she asked, tossing him the keys.

"Madisonville, Kentucky," he answered gruffly, still pissed about the wallet thing. "Gonna see if that lowlife at the desk has a map I can snag." And he shoved the door wide open, pushing the chairs he slept in across the floor.

Julie didn't know if she should follow him or not, so she hung back for a second, glancing around the parking lot. Deciding she was safer with Jim, she slowly followed him to the main office building they checked into. The morning air was cold, the wind blowing right through the light jacket the station's secretary had gotten her. Arms wrapped tightly around her frame, she glanced out the window to watch the cars pass by. No one had been there when they booked the room; the place didn't seem to get much activity. Pretty shitty place. No wonder.

Hopper studied the map, finger following along I-24 to Nashville.

"Jim..." Julie whispered, slapping him on the arm.

He snapped, "What?" drawing his attention toward the girl. Following her line of sight, Hopper saw a car pull up right next to his truck. Two guys got out, snooping in the windows. "Shit." The guy at the desk looked perplexed as Hop shoved the map under his arm. "Yeah, I need this so..." He slapped some money on the counter and turned to find Julie gone. The bell didn't ring so she couldn't have left the building. "Jul..." he whispered, walking toward the only other room



in the building: women's restroom. Rolling his eyes, he slapped his hand on the wooden door and stepped inside. "Julie, what the-" she was in there, opening the back window. "You know them?" She nodded furiously, pressing a finger to her lips to shush him. "You're saying we..." the bell to the front door sounded. Julie hoisted herself on the window's ledge. "*Jesus...*"

"Come on," she urged, slipping one leg then the other over the windowsill.

Hopper was convinced he wouldn't fit, but with a little shimmying he managed. Julie was peeking around the building by the time he caught up to her. Both guys had entered the office and there was no way to get to the truck without the possibility of them seeing out the front window.

"Okay, so we..." he started, glancing at her, but she was already gunning for it. "God *damn it!*" he took off too, keys in hand, unlocking the door as soon as he got to it. There was no bell sounding, no other footsteps, so he assumed they were in the clear. Breathless and agitated, Hopper started the truck and peeled out of the parking lot, Julie glancing behind them the whole way.

When she finally sat back in her seat, she breathed heavily. "That was close."

"Who were they?" Hopper tossed the map at her, merging back onto the highway. She caught the map without looking. Silence. "You need to start talking *right now*. Who were they? What do they want with you!?"

Julie bit the inside her of cheek. "They were two of the guys in the lab coats. They worked there." If only Hopper knew where *there* was. "They've come to take me back."

"Back *where*? Huh? Why are they so adamant about *you*?" Hopper slammed his hands on the steering wheel and Julie fell silent. Minutes passed. "How did they take you in the first place?" he asked quietly, trying another approach. "Where did they take you *from*?"

Julie set the map on the dashboard, straightening the paper out over

and over again with a nervous expression on her face. "My little sister went to college at Purdue University. It was almost spring break and we planned to take off to Florida for the week, but she had a few classes left. She convinced me to go to this stupid lecture with her." Julie shook her head with a sigh. "Something about the CIA, I dunno...but we went out and grabbed drinks that night." Hopper wanted to interrupt, but decided to let her keep talking. "We ended up at some party and Toni went to hook up with some lowlife. Told me to go back to her apartment. It wasn't a long walk and she knew her roommate would be there to let me in, so I went. Better than staying at some frat house." Hopper laughed without humor. "So I'm on my way back, feeling my drinks a little, and I notice this car...it's dark and I can't tell exactly, but it starts following me. By now I think I'm paranoid, but I still decide to cut through the woods behind Toni's place, just to get away from the road."

"Shit..." Hopper sighed at her stupidity for cutting through the woods. He figured he knew where this story was going.

Julie continued, "I'm walking through the parking lot and there's that damn car again. So I take off – start running for the door, up two flights of stairs, down the hall. And someone's running after me because I can hear their footsteps so I start pounding on doors but it's a Friday night and no one's home. I get to my sister's apartment, but someone grabs me before I can even knock." She closed her eyes. "He had greying hair, I can still remember. Big nose, birdlike features. And he's holding onto me and it hurts. Then he pricks me with something and I'm on the floor. I came to in a wheelchair, being pushed down some bright hallway and into a room I'd know well for the next seven months." The air was still after she finished, but she looked to him for some kind of acknowledgment. "Say something, please. I'm not crazy."

"Where did all the scars come from?" he asked low and slow.

It took her a minute to answer, but when she replied Hopper wished he hadn't asked. "Those two guys back there."

Pure fury bubbled inside of him. Questions upon questions and Hopper realized how deep he'd really gotten himself. It'd just been a case, he figured. Some stupid boyfriend –some fucked up nutjob with

a criminal history. But no.

"What the Hell is going on?" he struggled with the pack of cigarettes as he drove, but Julie grabbed them from him and helped him out. After lighting it and inhaling deep, Hopper nodded. "Okay. I got a pal out in Nashville, owes me a favor. Driving around this hunk of junk isn't helping. We've gotta get somethin' else."

Julie nodded at that, sitting back in her seat. "I could use a change of clothes and a shower."

Hopper gazed over at her then back to the road. "Right. Yeah. We can do that."

By the time he got off I-24, he was running on fumes. No one was trailing them that close, so he figured he had a few minutes to go grab some food from the gas station while the tank was filling. Kept an eye on her the entire time, though. Took the keys and all. The trust was thin, but there. She'd confided in him; that was a step. But he didn't know how much help he'd be. If she hadn't caught him the day she did, he likely wouldn't be sticking his neck out this much.

It'd been weeks since he'd heard from the other stations he'd applied to. Called around, asked some retired officer friends to keep their ears to the ground for openings. Bloomington just wasn't cutting it any longer. The memories were enough to drive him to the bottle every night. Grocery stores, drive-ins, Hell even fucking *parks* were reminding him of the life he'd lost. He needed to get out.

Pat Bartlett was an old buddy of his. They'd lost contact as people often do, but Pat was a bullheaded sonuvabitch who planted his roots in some plot of land in Nashville and dug himself so deep he wasn't getting out. The guy was a car buff, or he was last time Hop had spoken with him. Had a huge shed built just for storage. Got himself in debt, but the gambling blood in him got himself right back out.

"How much longer until we're at your friend's?" Julie asked as he set the bag of food on the floor between them.

Hopper removed the fuel nozzle, wiped his hands on his pants, and set himself back behind the wheel before answering. "Twenty minutes

from here."

"He have a wife I can steal clothes from?" She started digging in the bag for some food.

"No, but he has running water," Hopper started driving again. "We'll pick somethin' up soon."

"Good thing, too. Ditch the car, but not the badge?" Julie laughed with a shake of her head. "Not the best plan, Jim."

He exhaled in an almost-laugh that was mostly brought on from being called 'Jim' again.

## 5. Languor

Pat hadn't moved. Hopper knew because of that damn '57 Thunderbird peeking out of his garage. The slam of their car doors drew him out of his house.

"Hop!? Holy *Hell*, long time, brother!" Pat clapped him on the shoulder when he made his way up the steps. Julie was close behind, eyeing cautiously at Pat and peering into his house. "What brings you all the way out here?" Hopper knew he was checking out his car and the uniform.

"Well, uh..." he rubbed the back of his neck, looking at Julie who took a step closer to him.

"Come in," Pat seemed tentative. "And what's your lady's name?"

"Julie. This is Julie," Hopper replied, wanting to give him more details but lost on where to start.

Pat nodded. "Well, Julie, welcome. Go on in." He motioned toward the door. The woman was hesitant, but made her way inside. Hopper watched Pat's eyes trail over her as she walked in. One sidelong glance was sent to Hop with a nod and a thumbs up, but Hopper gave him a deadpan look. "You want anything to drink?" Pat followed Julie to the kitchen, pulling out three glasses and grabbing some whiskey. "All the way out here, you can't be on the job."

The three of them drank in silence for a moment, Hopper feeling awkward. It'd been years since they'd seen each other. Suddenly he spoke up, "I need a car."

Pat swallowed slow. "Do you now?"

"And I need to park my truck in its place. Just for a bit." He was met with silence. "Look, I'm in the middle of some shit and I just..." he glanced at Julie then back. "I just need this favor."

"I can do that," Pat shrugged. "Hell, after gettin' me outta that shit with Sherry? I owe you – big time."

Hopper laughed awkwardly, pretending not to notice the curious look Julie was giving him. "And we could use a shower. You know, if it's not too much trouble."

Pat nodded, finishing his drink then setting it on the counter. "That I can do. Separate showers, or...?" Julie blushed at that but nodded sternly which made Pat laugh boisterously. "Alright, chick, come on. Let me grab you a towel."

"Got any clothes she can change into? We kinda...bolted."

Pat's eyes trailed over Julie's body. "Nothin' that'll fit you proper."

"That's fine," Julie assured him, following him down the hall.

Hopper sighed, sitting down at the kitchen table and setting his head back against the wall. He closed his eyes for a few minutes, breathing evenly and almost drifting off.

"Hop...Hop! The girl wants you," Pat was in the room shortly, waking him from his almost-sleep.

"Yep, kay," he stood and trudged down the hall, glancing in empty rooms, then finally knocking on the bathroom door. "Jules?" The door opened almost instantly and he felt her hands gripping at his collar. He stepped in and she closed the door behind him.

"He put his hands on me."

"*What?*"

"Jim..." she sighed, tossing the clothes down on the floor. "He grabs me some random woman's shirt someone left over, turns around, and grabs my ass." Hopper rolled his eyes, familiar with his friend's antics. It wasn't the first time. Hell, the first time he'd met Diane, he'd done the same. Hopper bit his tongue at the thought. "I get we need a car, fine. But just..." she looked away, running her hand through her hair. "Please, don't leave me alone."

Her eyes were searching his for some kind of recognition, some sign he'd cave. And he honestly wanted to leave. Turn right down that hall, punch Pat in the mouth for doing that to some helpless girl, but

he didn't.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he looked at the shower, at the floor, at her. "I can't just..."

She nodded stiffly. "Yes, you can. Turn around." He rolled his eyes with a shake of the head before realizing she was serious. He turned to face the door, jaw tight. The sound of her shuffling her clothes off was heard before they were tossed to the ground and Hop could *not* believe he was doing this; that he was here – of all places – hiding his squad car, borrowing from an old drinking buddy, facing away from a naked chick.

He was tempted to apologize about his friend – tell her about the time Diane came over and they ended up hitting it off. How she'd come visit him, just the two of them alone in this house. How if he dug through these cabinets, he'd probably find her razor from that week she spent out here when the two of them were feuding. She'd used Sara as an excuse to get away – that she needed time in Nashville to clear her head. But he knew. Pat and Diane were fucking. She came back with this livelihood reawakened in her; this bright look on her face like her daughter wasn't sick in the hospital, vomiting up her guts. Hopper never let it go. She'd abandoned them for a week. That was when the fighting started. That was when Hop knew – if Sara didn't make it, there was no hope for their marriage.

Caught up in thought, Hopper cleared his throat and blinked hard, resting his head against the door for a mere moment while biting his tongue until he drew blood.

"...You're fine, right?" Hop spoke quieter, eyes closed while he turned his head toward Julie so she could hear. He just needed something to distract him. Wasn't that all this was? Handling this case to get out of his head?

"I'm fine," she spoke quietly, voice receding "Just don't leave." The shower turned on then and Hopper heard the curtain close.

"Can I open my eyes now?" he asked, but did it before she gave him the go-ahead.

Hopper cracked his back, deciding to sit against the door because, well, he didn't know if she took *long* showers. With the room steaming up, Hopper closed his eyes and felt himself drifting.

...

"Jim? ...Hop?" Julie's voice was beckoning him back to consciousness.

"Hm? Yeah." Hopper startled awake, blinking hard to find Julie crouching before him.

"You were thrashing," she looked concerned. "Did you wanna sleep before we drive again, or...?"

"Not a good idea," he grunted, hoisting himself up. "I'm gonna wash off quick."

Julie stayed crouched where she was, peering up at him. "Is it okay if I stay?" she asked quietly, looking timid.

"Fine by me." Hopper started undressing –tossing down his shirt, unzipping his pants. Julie turned away and he bit back a laugh, shaking his head before stepping into the shower.

Hopper welcomed the warm water. He needed a shave, but just being able to bathe for now would have to be enough.

"Can I make a phone call?" Julie asked over the water.

"Your parent's house?" he asked. There was silence. He waited.

"No, Lafayette."

"Why?"

"My sister."

Jim finished his shower without another word, running through the story she'd told him: the lecture, the woods, the car, the sedative. Who were these people? What did they want?



Shower turned off, Hopper grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his waist then stepping out. "Your sister still live there?"

"I don't know," she replied, gaze focused on his belly. She finally met his eyes and it was then he saw her anguish. "I don't even know if she's okay...did they hurt her?"

He didn't know what to say to that, so he just stood there, looking at the tile floor. "Mind waiting in the hall?" he scratched the back of his neck awkwardly then watched her go.

With her gone, Hopper slapped the mirror, wiping the steam away and taking a long look at the dark circles under his eyes. Pulling on his boxers and pants, he sighed deeply. The voices outside the door drew him from his thoughts. Pat must have been waiting to pounce on Julie. Swiftly, he opened the door and stepped into the hall.

"-No, I'm not from Indiana," Julie looked extremely agitated at Pat talking to her.

"Pat, you have a shirt I can snag?" With a nod, he left the room to grab Hopper a shirt. Julie gave him a 'let's get out of here' look and Hopper sighed. "You hear of anyone leaving Greensburg?" he called to Pat.

"Now don't tell me you're finally getting the itch to leave Bloomington," Pat laughed, approaching them again. A stiff nod, "I can make a call to Ronnie. He's still in tight with them. You apply anywhere?"

Hopper pulled the shirt over his head then slipped his arms in. "Yeah. Marion, Fishers, and Anderson."

Silence and then, "I heard about Sara. I'm sorry, man." Eyes downcast, jaw clenched, eyebrows furrowed, Hopper nodded stiffly. There it was again: that ache, that empty. How long had it been? How many months? He'd lost count. "I'm gonna guess that Diane's not in the picture anymore." The blank look Hop sent him said it all. "Hey, I just chat with her sister once in a while, alright? Haven't been keeping tabs on her." But Hopper didn't believe him. "I got your ride out of the garage while you were...enjoying the shower."

They followed him outside, Julie shoving her arms into the sleeves of her jacket as they walked toward the car.

"I'll just park the cruiser in its place for now. Only be a few days."

Pat shrugged. "Fine by me. I picked the least conspicuous of all my rides."

"Thank you," Julie spoke up.

"I gotta know: you running from something?" Pat asked. "Hop, it's been so long. I mean..."

"It's complicated, Pat," Hopper interrupted him. "Just...a case. I was told to do something, so I'm doing it."

Pat had questions, he knew. This would probably end their friendship, but Hopper didn't give a shit. He'd already separated himself so far from everyone else. What was one more person?

"I get it," Pat held up his hands. "Don't get my car shot up and we're good."

Hopper grunted. "I'll see what I can do." Grabbing his keys out of his pocket, he reached in the window and grabbed the map before tossing his keys to Pat. "We're gonna take off. I trust you can back in a cruiser?"

"Of course," Pat smirked. "How about another brew when you come back for her?"

"You've got a deal," Hopper assured him, slapping him on the back. "Thanks again."

...

"Who's Sara?"

Hopper tightened his grip on the steering wheel, grinding his teeth while pretending not to hear her. They'd been driving for a good twenty minutes of silence. "You gonna tell me about the scars?" He rebuttaled.

Silence again.

"Find me a payphone," she huffed and he noticed she was avoiding his comment. Fine by him. She shouldn't ask questions he wasn't ready to answer unless she was willing to reciprocate.

So he did. Partially because he wanted to know if her sister was part of all this, and partially because he needed a moment to himself. Every child they passed on the road, he pictured that pale hair, those big doe eyes, that lifeless look that he couldn't shake.

Slamming his hands on the steering wheel, Hopper blinked back tears. He had *nothing* – nothing anymore. So it made sense that he was helping some stranger chase some lead across state lines.

The door slamming drew him back to the present. He sat silent, staring at her for a few moments, trying to read her expression.

"Well?"

"She says she's okay," she spoke slowly, but she was tense.

"And?"

"I'm worried. If they know who she is...they could-"

Jim realized where her mind was going. "You wanna go back, don't you?" Julie looked up sheepishly. "Fuck, Julie, you can't be serious." She went quiet. "If they took you from there and you got free twice, winding up *around* there? They're *there*."

"All the more reason I can't leave my sister."

Hopper smacked the steering wheel again, bringing his hand to his mouth as he considered their options. "Can't you call her back?" A pause. "Call her back, tell her she might be in danger. Get her to meet us somewhere."

"Where? It'll take her *hours* to get here. And we don't have hours!" she exclaimed. Hopper pulled at the map, placing a finger on Lafayette, a finger on Nashville. Eyebrows furrowed, he bit his tongue as his eyes darted between the two. Julie peered over as well and he smelled

Pat's shampoo. "My dad lived in Louisville before he met my mom – has a cabin there; inherited it from my grandpa."

"Well, Louisville is almost the midpoint. Your sister drive?" Julie nodded. "If you're serious about this, we'll be driving three hours in the opposite direction. That is, *if* you can convince her."

"I have to try," Julie got out, jogging back to the payphone with the quarters from Hop's cup holder.

He ached for family at the moment. As much as it irritated him that they'd made this much progress yet she wanted to backtrack, he understood. If he could have gone back and saved Sara, he would have done anything no matter the cost.

Lighting a cigarette, he sat and waited.

## 6. Catharsis

"There a phone line there?"

"No. Dad had it disconnected years ago."

"Well, then how will we know she's actually still coming?"

Julie was silent for a tick. "Faith."

*Faith* was a funny thing. Hopper didn't have it, not anymore. Faith was for those desperate fuckers to use in their time of need. Faith was for helpless parents with no fight left in them as they watched doctors swarm their unconscious daughter. *Faith* was not gonna do *shit*.

"Right."

They'd been driving for another hour and the tension in the air was stifling. Not many words had been spoken since Julie jumped back in the car, telling Hop that her sister agreed to meet at the cabin. So backtracking it was. Those guys in the black car probably still assumed they were driving to Mississippi and that worried Hopper, though he didn't voice it yet. What happened when they made it to Mississippi before Julie did? What happened to her parents? What would they *do*?

"I could use a drink or several right now," Julie's voice cut through his thoughts. Hop did a double-take and saw the nervous look on her face. He fished in his pocket for his pack of cigarettes. Only a few left, but he offered one up. "Thanks." She lit it and inhaled deeply.

"We could pick some up," he suggested. "Bar right now might be a bad call, but..."

"I'd like that."

It was the most normal conversation he thought they'd had. Grabbing a drink together. Picking up a pack of something, buying more cigs, eating greasy pizza in her dad's cabin. It sounded almost ordinary.

"Good," Hop spoke simply.

"So this Pat guy...you didn't seem to like him too much. But he sure liked you," Julie ruined the moment. Ruined it. Poked and pushed too hard and Hopper got defensive.

Eyes narrowed he glanced at her. "Oh, yeah? You think you're so keen on this crap?"

Julie shrugged. "Just felt it."

But *how*? How had she felt it? He barely spoke as-is – to anyone! So how could she tell? She didn't know him.

It took him a good five minutes to acknowledge, "Pat slept with my ex-wife, but he doesn't know I know."

Julie put out the cigarette, humming softly and almost stuck in her own head before shaking it off, back to an expression Hopper couldn't read. She said, "I'm sorry," and he grunted once again, not wanting her pity. "How long were you married?"

"*Jesus*, isn't that kinda personal?" he snapped. The unfazed look on her face made him wonder if she was *aware* she was pushing his buttons. He assumed she was. "Seven years." Almost instantly, he changed subjects. "You ever gonna tell me what happened in that place? Why you got all those scars?"

Her reply was simple, but not enough, "I will."

"Oh really?"

"Buy me a drink and I'll get there."

He glanced at her again. "Deal."

...

One pit stop and another two hours of driving, Hopper was exhausted. But they were there. Grabbed a couple six packs and some more cigarettes like he'd planned from a nearby liquor store. Waited for a few pizzas too, but it hadn't been that long. They were chatting

about music when she told him the cabin was on the right. Told him to park behind the place, just in case.

The look on Julie's face when she exited the car, carrying a six pack made Hop pause. There was a lost look in her eyes, but also a tinge of concentration. A single breath left her before she told him to go in, that the key should be in the mailbox. It was.

It was dusty and smelled like stale air, but it would work just fine. Clearly no one had been there in what looked like years. After a moment's pause in the doorway, Julie went to clean up. Hopper settled on the couch after a few minutes.

The mantle was empty, no family pictures anywhere, no sense that this house was actually *lived in*. Just a pit in Hopper's chest that told him he'd been thinking about family too much.

Julie came up behind him, almost reading the look on his face. "We'd stop here once in a blue moon. Never long. Dad lived here before he met mom and came back after my grandpa died. Cleared out the place, minus a few essentials like plates and blankets and pillows. Only what we'd need to crash a night or two on our way to my aunt and uncle's house in Cincinnati."

Hopper didn't even acknowledge that he'd heard her, just stared down at the floor, eyes feeling heavy. He pinched the bridge of his nose and blinked hard, sighing.

The sound of plates brought him in the kitchen, not even realizing she'd gone. She cut the pizza with a fork and lifted him a few slices. Hopper practically salivated on the spot, ready to enjoy something other than gas station food.

"How could you *actually* tell there was shit going on with Pat?" Hopper asked what had been on his mind for hours, digging through the drawers to find a bottle opener. Julie was beside him in a second, opening the right drawer and pulling out the opener.

"When I told you he grabbed my ass, you rolled your eyes and...the air changed."

Two beers opened, he set them down and turned to her. "What?"

She looked away sheepishly. "I could sense it. Like...something similar had happened before. Like you were thinking – you're always thinking and never saying..." she ran a hand through her hair. "This isn't making any sense and I'm sorry. I barely know you."

Hopper bit the inside of his cheek. She'd been that in-tune with him after a mere few days spent together.

"How do you do it?" he found himself asking.

She stilled again, looking dead at him. "I don't *do* anything. It's just... it's *there*." Hopper didn't understand and she could read that too. "Let's eat."

Julie had dusted off the table so the two could sit, but Hopper was fine with standing. He felt like distancing himself. He swallowed a bite then downed some of his beer. Glancing at her, he noticed she was staring.

"What?"

She shook her head, looking away. Hopper felt transparent. Felt like she *knew* things –things she shouldn't. He sat.

Four pieces, a beer and a half, Hopper finally sat back – contented. Meanwhile, Julie was just opening her second beer then placing the dishes in the sink. She paused before it, as if deciding against washing them, then grabbed the drink and returned to her seat across from him. Eyes downcast, she inhaled sharply.

"They started doing these...surgeries," she spoke it as more of a question than a declaration. "I don't really know. But I was taken down the hall and given these injections and I'd pass out. When I woke up I was back in that room again, feeling achy and cotton-mouthed." Hopper's jaw tensed as she spoke. "I felt so sick. I'd be vomiting and coughing up blood for days – or, I *think* days – there were no windows or clocks. But the lab coat men would've changed shirts. I kind of judged days based on their clothing..."

"For a few weeks that went on and the one day I reached on my back



where it was hurting and I felt stitches. Right down my spine." Hopper was reminded of the look he got at it that day at the station. "And so every time they'd take me out of that room, I would come back sicker than ever and find stitches. They started covering it was gauze and tape, but I knew it was there."

Hopper finished his second beer. "But you don't know what they did to you?"

Julie sat, stone-faced, staring at him now. "The one time I got ahold of that syringe and broke it on the floor. They took me out on a stretcher to some room with all this medical equipment and put me under. That was when I came back with this," she pointed to her shoulder where Hop remembered she had a jagged 'z' shaped scar.

"And whatever they did made you sick?"

"Eventually no. I stopped throwing up. They stopped working on me after I think two months. It was exhausting." She held her head. "But I started noticing things. I wasn't in a blur anymore. Like, everything was clearer. I started being able to tell when the guy was coming with my dinner. Even though the door was closed, I'd wake up before the lights in the hall were even on. I knew when someone was standing outside my door –knew it before they even unbolted it. And I could hear this girl's voice sometimes."

"A girl?"

"Yeah. Like a little girl's voice. She didn't talk much, but there was always a man with her. She called him 'Papa' and he always tried to shush her when they came down the hall, like he didn't want me to know something. Like it was a secret."

Hopper furrowed his brow, repeating this over and over in his head and hoping it would start to make sense. It didn't.

"Did you ever see her?" she shook her head at his question. "Were you ever out of that room, besides the surgeries?"

Julie swallowed her beer down quickly, eyes closed tight. A nod. "They walked me down the hallway every day, to this little room.

The first few times I fought them and they sent me back to 'my' room with I think a sedative. The third time I went there, they gave me the sedative, then made me take some kind of pill. I didn't fight it. But it made me *see* things. And hear things, too. Like, screaming." She held her head. "My mind sounded like I was in a horror movie. And they put me in this all-white room that hurt my eyes and the screaming didn't stop, but I startled...hallucinating?"

The words were quick and jumbled, but Hopper followed along as best he could. This was likely the first time she was saying this aloud. "Then what?"

"I *saw* things, Jim. Terrible things. Bodies and blood and people being ripped apart. I didn't know if any of it was real, but it *felt* real. And yet I was torn; I felt the room I was in. I could hear a door opening and I'd turn and there was nothing. Then someone was behind me and I knew. Something came out of the wall and I could feel it before the bricks even crumbled. It was like I was hyper-aware or something."

There was a lengthy pause then. She didn't get up for another drink, didn't make a move, just sat there breathing.

"Julie?"

"I know I sound crazy, okay?" she looked up, tear-filled eyes. "But you *have* to believe me."

Hopper wanted to, but he couldn't. He was the type to have to *see* something to believe it, not be told some fairytale story. "Let me see your scars."

Her jaw tensed. "You don't believe me." She nodded, lips pursed. "I get it."

And instantly she stood, slipping the shirt over her head. Standing in just a bra, Jim let his eyes trail over her skin –nothing sexual for once in his life, but searching for answers. There were a few scars here and there, then the large one on her shoulder. He stood, squinting, stepping toward her to get a better look. The deer-in-the-headlights look on her face made his breath hitch. He suddenly saw a flash of

his daughter in the park the first time she started with the breathing issue –that frantic look he couldn't get out of his mind. His hand came down toward her shoulder before he registered it, but Julie was jumping away before he made contact.

They met eyes. He pressed on, fingers falling over the exposed, scarred skin. And she let him.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," he reassured her. "I just wanna get a look."

She nodded stiffly, giving him permission. He didn't take his hand from her shoulder, but stepped behind her, dipping his head lower to get a better view of her spine. Sure enough, one large scar slightly to the left of her spine, peeking above the band of her bra and settling two inches above the waistband of her pants.

Slowly, Hopper pushed her hair over her unscathed shoulder, gazing at the base of her neck to find a horizontal scar.

"Are they bad?" Julie asked softly.

"You've never seen them?" Hopper questioned, not taking his eyes off of them. "Go look."

She left then, brought her beer in the bathroom with her and he hung back for a minute, staring at the shirt Pat had given her, balled up on the table. He brought it with him while he searched one of the bedrooms, digging through dressers until he found another woman's shirt that would fit her. With a hard throw, Hop pitched Pat's bedmate's shirt at the wall and went to bring the other to Julie.

He found her in the dimly-lit bathroom, perched on the sink counter, gripping onto the ledge until her knuckles turned white. Tearstains cascaded down her cheeks. Hopper stood awkwardly in the doorway, holding onto the shirt in his hands and suddenly feeling stupid for the gesture. Julie's back was to the mirror.

"You know," she started, wiping her face. "For seven months, I thought about what it would be like to go back. Who would be there, how long it would take to get things back to normal. If that idiot bartender would finally ask me out on a date...but that was stupid of

me." Hopper just stared at her. "Who would ever be able to look at *this*," she pointed behind her. "-and be attracted to it?"

She held her head in her hands for a while and Hopper stood there breathing. When he decided to move, she was already aware and looking at him.

"Found this in the bedroom," he handed her the shirt. "Thought it might make you...comfortable or something."

Holding it in her hands, she smiled softly then slid it on. "Thank you." She finished her beer, slamming it back down on the countertop. "Let's have another drink."

He didn't protest.

## 7. Dalliance

"You're shitting me," Hopper shook his head. "You can tell that far?"

Julie laughed, cheeks reddened. "Look out the front window," she instructed again. "There's a car coming down the road. It's quiet and they're doing below the speed limit."

Hopper stood there, waiting, peering back and forth. "From the right or left?"

"Left"

Sure enough, twenty seconds went by – he counted – and a little red car drove by slowly. "Jesus *Christ*..." he drank more of his beer. "That's impressive."

She was smirking at him. "So you believe me now?"

They'd been at it for a good half hour; Julie telling him the animals in the backyard –a possum scurrying by the car, a squirrel twenty feet away with its tail flicking back and forth. She'd managed to call countless speeding cars before they'd even gotten into Hopper's sight while he stood on the front porch. He'd even gone as far as walking around the cabin, her eyes closed, asking her to sense which room he was in.

Whatever they'd done to her was sadistic, perplexing, but ultimately...*interesting*. Hopper found himself wanting to question her more, get a sense of *how* they'd done it. *Why* they did it. What where they planning to use her for? Clearly it wasn't a 'catch and release' sort of deal, considering they caught her last time she escaped. Were they not done with her?

"Your reflexes too," he noted, remembering the time she jumped out of the window at the diner the other day.

She nodded. "My senses are incredible. It's..." she shrugged. "it's weird, I know." He finished another beer, offering her another as he opened one more himself. "If I have any more, I'm gonna need more

food." Her cheeks had a slight pinkness to them since the last beer. "My tolerance is nowhere near what it should be."

Jim found himself smiling –actually *smiling*. "It's kind of amazing you know, what you can do."

"Freaky, more like."

Hopper sat down beside her on the couch, one arm over the back, the other hand holding onto his beer. And suddenly he was overflowing. It was like a geyser sprung up inside his brain and he was feeling comfortable enough to stop biting his tongue and just *speak*.

"M'sorry 'bout Pat gettin' handsy," his thumbnail peeled at the label on the bottle. "He got that way with Diane too back when he met her."

"Diane was your wife?" she asked softly from beside him, pulling her legs up on the couch. He nodded, eyes still focused on the beer bottle. "Before he slept with her."

"This was years before they...-yeah," he breathed deeply. "Ditched us, yanno? Just...just fuckin' left me with...with Sara," the label peeled off on one corner. "I got this sick little girl with me and I'm not sleepin' and Diane's not callin'. She'd just started treatment and her hair was fallin' out and her pretty little eyes were bloodshot...dark circles. She wouldn't stop vomiting."

"Your daughter had cancer," Julie pieced together, speaking her findings aloud. "Jim..." her hand came to his wrist where he wore Sara's hair tie. He didn't push her off. "Jim, I'm so sorry..." There was recognition in her voice suddenly, like she'd just learned that Sara didn't make it. He wondered if it was the whole heightened senses thing. Did he carry himself like someone who lost a child? Could she see the hole in him?

"Diane left a week after we buried her. This is the first time I've been out of Bloomington since Sara's diagnosis."

There was a moment that was completely still. "I heard you tell Pat you're looking for a job," Julie still hadn't moved her hand from his.

"You're trying to move on." He was staring at her now, giving her a stiff nod. Slowly, she shifted toward him, taking her hand and gingerly moving it to his chest. He tensed, stilled –stopped breathing. With her fingers splayed across the center of his chest, her expression changed. Tears filled her eyes, full lips pressed in a deep pout. "Sadness," she said. "I feel so much sadness," and she pressed into her chest twice.

He closed his eyes tight, hanging his head. Tears prickling behind his eyes, he breathed deeply.

Suddenly, Julie's hand pulled away from him and she was at her feet.

"What's wrong?" he stood too, stuffing down the brokenness he was feeling.

"Someone's coming."

"*Someone*?" he questioned. "You can't tell?"

Shaking her head, she furrowed her brows. "Maybe..." she breathed deeply, blinking slowly. "There's no car," she trailed off. "They're walking here."

"How many?"

"One. Just one. I don't know them." Her eyes bolted open just before a knock at the door. Hopper grabbed his gun, sliding it in the back of his jeans before stepping forward.

He wanted her to stay back, but she was the first one at the door as if he needed protection. Upon opening it, they discovered an older lady standing on the front porch.

"Can I help you?" Julie asked.

"Are you the owner of this place? I haven't seen any activity here for years," the lady complained, eyeing between Jim and Julie then peering behind them into the house.

Hopper crossed his arms but Julie beat him to a response.

"My parents own this cabin for vacation use," Julie explained. "We're rarely ever here. Are you a neighbor or...?"

"Yes and I'm hoping your folks start taking pride in homeownership. This place is an eyesore. I've lived here for five years and not once have I seen a fresh paintjob or gardening."

Julie bit the inside of her cheek, glancing at Jim then stepping closer to the woman. "Right. We'll get on that. Bye now." She closed the door on the woman, rolling her eyes after locking it. "Unbelievable."

Hopper almost laughed at the tension they'd felt before; the gun in his pants ready to use, the expectation that it was those men. But the laugh never came.

"Now I *know* you want another beer," she pressed a hand against his chest again then moved to the kitchen to grab another.

Hopper felt empty again. Numb, almost. Her abilities made him so transparent, he felt like he wasn't in control and that bothered him. She'd sensed his pain about his daughter, sensed the tension between him and Pat.

Upon entering the kitchen, Hopper saw her staring in the reflection of the microwave, shirt pulled to the side to reveal that 'z' shaped scar. It wasn't hideous like she made it out to be, at least Hopper thought.

"You look fine," he said gruffly without even thinking. She stood and blinked at him for a moment, shaking her head after a second.

"How 'bout that beer?" she tried to change the subject, but Hopper caught her wrist as she passed. The two stood silent, waiting for the other to move. Four breaths before Hopper dipped down and caught her lips with his.

They'd both been surprised he realized as he pulled away. He'd actually managed to catch her off-guard and that *sorta* felt good. She was blushing like mad, staring up with those wide eyes.

He wanted a cigarette. Something to do with his hands and his mouth so he didn't cross some *line*.



Brushing passed her, he pulled the pack from his pocket and was about to put one to his lips when her hand snuck it out of his fingers. Glancing down at her, he saw a tentative look on her face and guilt settled itself in his ribs. What was he *doing*?

Yet she stood on tip toes, wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled him down to kiss her deeply. It wasn't raunchy and steamy, but it was some sort of comfort.

"Jim..." she hummed against his mouth and he found himself clinging to her: hands on her hips, forehead to forehead. "I wanna feel *good* again..." her voice was airy.

"I know what you mean," he acknowledged.

She kissed him again, trailing her tongue over his bottom lip and maybe he shouldn't have been doing this. Maybe he should have gotten fresh air, smoked that pack, and slept it off but here was a pretty girl who'd been through Hell, who *felt* what he felt. Talk about empathy. Talk about *fate*. Just the distraction he needed.

And maybe he shouldn't have pulled her into him tighter to feel his growing erection, but that was just the kind of dirty *fuck* he was.

She pulled away after a minute, breathless and he was *convinced* he'd ruined it. She'd run. These *people* would find her and he'd have another body on his conscience. He'd be gutted.

To his surprise, she grabbed his wrist and led him to a bedroom.

...

Maybe she wasn't as experienced as some of the gals he was used to nailing and maybe she was more self-conscious than he was, but he'd managed to get her undressed. Pale, thin, tentative – she climbed into his lap and forced him to disrobe as well.

They probably looked like a sight.

But she *sure* knew how to use her mouth.

Hopper wasn't looking forward to foreplay, but he knew it was

expected. Yet when he went to return the oral favor, she urged him to fuck her instead.

God the mouth she had on her. He hadn't expected it. Welcomed it, sure; she was full of surprises. He wondered if this was the type of girl she was before they took her.

And then he stopped wondering because she was straddling his thick thighs and looking down at him with those bedroom eyes and *fuck* he couldn't wait to feel something again.

...

"It hurts," she said, continuing to rock her hips, fingers splayed across his belly.

He just grunted, eyes closed, trying to ignore his irritation that *she wasn't going fast enough*.

She must have knuckled through it because before he could take his next breath she was doing this *incredible* thing with her hips and Hopper almost gasped.

If he didn't take control of things soon, he'd shoot his load before he could even *enjoy* himself.

Overpowering her was easy – she was pretty petite. He didn't have any really *fancy* moves like she did – probably came with her being young – but she didn't seem to mind. The pretty 'o' shape of her mouth, eyes closed tight, fingers pressing into his biceps; he was content enough with her pleasure.

...

She'd called him 'Jim' when she came and it floored him for some reason. Something intimate; Diane had been the only one to call him that, really. And then anger filled him at the thought of that woman leaving when they needed each other most. Hopper's vision went black for a moment while he thrust into Julie harder. Fueled by that fury, he heard Julie's moans and tried to get himself back to the moment, but his mind was pulling him somewhere else entirely.

"Jim, please," Julie begged, tears prickling. "Harder, baby," she gasped. "Jim, come for me." And he was right there, back in the moment, feeling tension building, building, then release.

They'd both wanted to *feel* something and, fuck, did they.

## 8. Supine

Hopper found himself lying on his back, those musty bedsheets draped over his lower half. They were both in and out of sleep for a time but at the moment Julie was out.

Staring at the ceiling, Hopper grimaced. He'd managed to keep up the distraction while his shaft was buried deep in her tight pussy, but now his mind was racing. What in the Hell was going on? This chick had fallen into some *crap* with some psychotic people. How many were they talking about? Dozens? Was it a hospital? How had she not gotten a good look at it when she escaped?

This had to be some setup. He'd never experienced anything like this. It had to be a line of bullshit.

But she *felt* things and *knew* things. Hopper was a man in need of proof and, fuck, was there proof of what she could do. Truth be told, he was torn. A part of him felt so damn pleased after that hookup. It'd been too long, really. Yet he felt empty again. Thinking of getting her home where she belonged was part of his job, but this had been the most adrenaline-inducing few days since...well...since Sara.

Hopper turned over, staring at Julie who looked content in her sleep. Her breasts were uncovered and she looked like some wet dream from his teen years with the moonlight flitting through the blind slats.

Getting attached was a bad idea, and Hopper was *far* from attached to this chick, but he dreaded that drive back home. Alone. Back to the familiar feel of an empty house filled with the ghosts of his past. Working that same shit job with those same shit coworkers. He needed a change – needed to follow up on those applications.

But it felt good to have someone beside him in bed again, even if it was just for the night. He fell asleep with the thought of Diane having been able to fall asleep next to someone all this time. The anger was yet again settling in his abdomen. He didn't know how much longer he could go before he completely *lost it*.

...

"Jim."

"Mmm?" the groan that left him hadn't felt like it came from his throat. He'd been in that half-awake half-asleep state once again, blinking away the contents of a dream.

"Jim, wake up. We've got company."

At that, he shot straight up in the bed, eyes scanning the room. Julie had been in a dark flannel and jeans, sex hair pulled up in a bun, looking unfazed.

"Who is it?" his groggy voice rang out.

"My sister."

Oh, *fuck*.

Struggling with his pants, he pulled on the shirt Pat had given him and stumbled out of the bedroom. The sunlight made him glance at the clock on the wall but it was dead.

There was a knock on the door and Julie went to answer it. Though Julie was the older sister, Toni was taller. They shared similar features, Toni's hair a little lighter, but you could tell they were sisters.

The girls hugged instantly, both crying softly. Julie breathed in the familiar scent of her sister's perfume. It'd felt like years since the night she was taken and though some memories were distant, this *felt* like her sister. Her cheekbones were a bit more defined, womanhood settling into her 'baby' sister nicely.

Hopper looked away awkwardly after a minute. He couldn't imagine what the family went through after Julie was taken.

"Toni, this is Jim," Julie introduced him. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him."

Toni shook his hand, thanking him repeatedly – a little too much for

Jim's comfort level – considering he'd just *plowed* her sister. "Jules, what happened to you?"

Julie breathed deeply. "You have to come into this with an open mind."

Hopper was glad to hear the story again – he'd caught more details and understood it better, though it was still just as fucked up. Toni took it better than he'd expected. Didn't question things, didn't even ask her to show her powers.

"Did anyone ever come for you?" Hopper asked Toni after the story. "Anyone talk to you or your family?"

Toni shook her head. "No. No one came to me. We put up posters everywhere, Jules. You were on the news...and then...people just...forgot." She started crying again. "I thought it was some crazy frat guy – someone at that party that night."

"No, Toni, nothing like that."

"So who are these people?"

Hopper sighed. "That's the problem – we don't know."

"I got out both times at night. I didn't see much of the facility, but it was big. Like – hospital big."

"So maybe it *was* a hospital," Toni offered.

Julie shrugged. "They kept everything tight-lipped. It was just me and some lab coat men."

Hopper's fury was almost overpowering at that moment. He felt like he was chasing a lead that would go nowhere. All they had was Julie, a blue Sedan, and those black cars coming after them.

...

"This is a stupid idea," Hopper hummed as he threw the car in park. Glancing at the girls, he shook his head. "I don't like it at all."

"Jim, we need to pick up some stuff if we're staying the night again," Julie demanded. "Toni needs to sleep and then we can take off in the morning."

"Sleep in back," Hopper suggested for the fifth time, though he knew it was fruitless. These women had their own judgments and nothing would change their minds but those men breaking down that door. Hopper sighed. "Fine. But I'm coming too."

...

Thankfully Toni had enough sense to grab some cash before she left. Hopper was running low. Toni bought liquor for them which sort of brightened Hopper's spirits.

Julie didn't want to focus on the past, though Toni kept bringing up the night of her disappearance. The details hadn't been fuzzy – she'd been through them time and time again for the last seven months. That was all she had to think about in that room, really. It was like she was imprisoned.

When Toni left the room to get more pizza, she saw Jim staring at her and it made her blush. He was thinking about the night before and his eyes were glazed over.

With another person in the cabin, Hopper realized how out of place he felt. He hadn't left the damn state since Sara died and now here he was. Hopper was sure it was the booze, but he felt fucking *alone*. They needed to leave, that was all. Keep moving. If he sat still for too long the thoughts started up again. Drinking till blackout was the only cure.

"Do you think you'll be fired after all this?" Julie asked and Hopper raised his eyebrows, pursing his lips.

"Probably," he nodded. When he glanced up at her, her expression looked bleak. "Ah, fuck 'em. Captain put me on parking duty until I get my act together."

"You wanna leave anyway, right?"

"Right."

When Toni returned, their conversation stopped and Hopper was thankful because he didn't want to explain his pathetic existence to anyone else.

"How's school?" Julie asked. Toni cringed. "You're going still, right?" No answer. "Toni!"

Her sister stiffened. "Look, it's been hard, okay? I wanted to take a year off, get my head together. I started dating this guy, Randy..." she shrugged. "I can start again in the fall if I wanted to."

"If?" Julie repeated. "Toni..."

"You were gone, Jules!" Toni raised her voice. "Mom was a mess. I couldn't focus anymore...so I started working more, met Randy. Things just seemed right. Besides, I don't even know if the medical field is what I want anymore."

Julie sat silent, sipping her drink and staring at the floor. The weight of guilt fell on her. Her sister would have been a few months away from graduation by now, applying to jobs that paid way more than the café she probably still worked at. There was a little thought in the back of her mind that if she would have just *stayed* at that party, these men would never have grabbed her. It would have been someone else and her life wouldn't have been turned upside down.

"I'm sorry," was all she could say.

"It isn't your fault – it was those men! We searched through those woods like crazy – Tina said she saw you cut through and then no one saw you again. I was convinced we'd find you there, but..." Toni started tearing up. "I can't believe no one answered their doors when you ran knocking for help."

"It was a Friday night, T, what do you expect?" Julie tried to laugh but couldn't. Her mind flashed to the grey-haired man injecting her with a syringe before she passed out in his arms.

Jim sat silent, finishing up his drink and staring at the wall behind Toni's head. Once he got Julie home, he'd look into the hospitals in Indiana – and *then what?* Ask them about a secret plan to work on



people and create them into freaks with powers? Hopper had to rethink this.

"Is this over?" Toni finally asked. "Will they find you?"

Julie didn't look at her right away and she could hear the sniffing of her younger sister. She felt like she was ten years old again, comforting her baby sister after her pet hamster died. Julie was always her sister's protector against the world's hardships.

"I doubt it," she answered honestly then looked up at Toni. "We need to get mom and dad out of that house. We need to keep moving – change everything. These people are powerful. Like...like government powerful."

Hopper's fingers tingled. "I'll help in any way I can, but you've gotta keep in contact with me if you're moving like that," he demanded. "I can't help if I can't find you."

"Officer Hopper," Julie started and it was the first time she'd called him that. "once I get home, your job is done. You just need to stay safe. They probably know all about you already."

Hopper grimaced. "You're outta your *Goddamn* mind if you think I'm dropping it after this. We need to stop these men. Who *knows* what else they're capable of – how many others they've taken and...and... *experimented* on." He searched for the words. "No. I'm not dropping this case."

Julie bit the inside of her cheek, staring at Jim. She felt his fire, his rage – felt it bubbling over from this, but it'd started when his daughter got sick. She could feel it; different layers of anger all piling up into the rage sitting beside her now.

"Okay," she breathed out. "Okay, Jim."

He stilled then, feeling like an asshole for going off on her, surprised she backed down.

"We should sleep," Toni piped up. "Leave early morning."

"Good idea," Hopper managed to mutter before Toni got up and

hugged her sister goodnight.

Julie wasn't tired so she went to take a hot bath instead. A part of her wanted to light candles, but she didn't want to be alone with her thoughts in the dark. So, lights on, she closed the curtain and laid back with a sigh.

*"It's okay, little bird...it'll all be okay." The voice was from her memories, but she felt it in the room with her. The grey-haired man's face came into view in the bright lights of the hallway she was being pushed down in the wheelchair when she arrived. "Take her to room seventeen."*

"Julie!" the voice that called her out of her dreamlike state was deep, groggy. "Jules!" Hands were shaking her shoulders and she opened her eyes wide, gasping. "Jesus Christ..."

"Jim?"

The water was ice cold now and Julie wondered just how long she'd been in the bathtub.

"Your lips are blue," Jim grabbed a towel.

"How long have I been in here?" she shivered, standing and grabbing the towel from him so she could cover herself.

"Dunno..." he shook his head. "Fell asleep. You didn't answer the door."

"I'm sorry," she glanced at the wet floor beneath her.

"You were thrashing," he commented, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

The memory still clawed at her mind, but she tried to focus on the present moment. Jim didn't leave the room. As she dressed, he looked at her expectantly.

"I get these memories sometimes. Dreams, maybe...I don't know. But they feel so real and it's like I'm there again."

Jim nodded, lips pressed together tightly. He knew all too well.

Hadn't people said something about soldiers and PTSD? Hadn't he struggled with night terrors himself? He'd been there.

"You wanna stay up?" he was exhausted but if she wanted company, he'd take her up on it.

"No," she shook her head. It was awkward asking him, but she couldn't think about sleeping alone. "Stay with me tonight."

Jim tensed, jaw clenching and unclenching. "Yeah, sure."

## 9. Tremor

Toni woke up before Julie did. The look on her sister's face when she entered the kitchen said it all. She knew – must have snooped through the house to see who slept where.

Fooling around with Jim that night hadn't been on her mind, but with a body in bed beside her again, it was like her hormones were in hyper drive from all the months of no sex. There was a man beside her again and even if she didn't mean anything to him, if he wanted a blowjob, who was she to say no? She *owed* him so much – for helping her, crossing state lines, keeping her safe.

"What's going on here, Jules?" Toni asked.

Julie answered honestly, "Nothing." She shrugged.

Having Jim's fingers knotting in her hair as he thrust into her mouth meant nothing. His mouth kissing down her body, his beard tickling her inner thighs as she clamped them around his head and tried not to cry out – that was nothing. A distraction for them both, yes. Two broken, lonely, aching individuals craving the intimacy of a lover. If she hadn't been here, he would have passed her over no doubt. She was a freak and he was the broken shell of a childless father and ex-husband. So no, nothing was *going on*.

Jim woke feeling rested and pleased for once. Seeing Julie in the kitchen, he tried to fight back a smirk at her pink cheeks. Toni looked him up and down, sizing up if he was suitable for her sister. Surely she knew what happened last night. Surely she disproved. Still, the breathless look Julie greeted him with was 'good morning' enough.

"Coffee?" he asked to which the girls shook their heads. "Well, looks like we're making a stop." He needed coffee – hadn't had it in three days.

"How's mom holding up?" Julie asked her sister, probably in an attempt to change the subject they weren't speaking about – the details of her sex life.

"She thinks you're on your way home," Toni mentioned. "That call, she figured you'd be home by now." Jim was reminded of Larks poor suggestion of using that phone line to contact her folks.

"You heard from 'em in the last day?" Hopper asked, sipping the swig of booze left in his glass from the night before. He cringed.

Toni nodded. "I called and told them we were meeting at the cabin and both driving up."

Hopper almost choked mid-drink. Julie stood wide-eyed. "You *what*?"

Toni looked confused. "They have me report in all the time, Jules. You know how it is. I just didn't want them worried."

Julie's head was spinning suddenly, reminded of the call the police made and how quickly the birdlike man in the blue Sedan had come rushing to get her – like he'd been connected to their phone lines somehow. It didn't make sense and she didn't understand it, but her gut was telling her that was the damn truth. Like in those movies – the phones are bugged.

"We've gotta go," Hopper slammed his glass down, rushing to grab his keys off the counter. He was out the door, gun in hand, ready, before the girls even made it to the porch. "Leave the shit, we go: *now!*"

"My keys!" Toni gasped, running back to grab them. Julie had the bag of food, loading it in the car then grabbing her sister's arm and pulling her close.

"You stay on Jim, you hear me?" at the tone of Julie's voice, Hopper glanced her way to see just how flustered she'd been then looked both ways down the road: nothing.

"We've just gotta drive," Hopper commented. "Honk if you've gotta stop for gas, but we get the Hell outta here. *Now.*"

"I love you. I'm sorry," Toni gasped, tears falling.

"I know. I love you too."

Julie hugged her sister then let Jim pull her away. Within a minute,

their two cars took off down the road, Hopper in a mad hurry.

"Stupid," Jim huffed, tossing his gun to the floor.

"She didn't know," Julie spoke as if she were trying to convince herself.

And then it seemed like time moved in slow motion. Jim checked the mirror, glancing at Toni's car following behind. A side street jutted off to the left of them, a group of black cars driving recklessly right toward them. Jim sped up, glancing in the rearview as the cars crashed right into Toni's car.

Julie's scream sounded distant. Her whole body was turned in the seat, staring at the wreckage of black cars and Toni's tan one. Two trucks remained, trailing Jim.

"Toni," Julie sobbed, pressing her head to the back of the seat and crying out.

Jim jammed on the breaks as another set of black cars came into view in front of him. Julie grabbed at the seat, turning her body and trying to tear her view away from the wreck. Swerving down another road, Jim tried losing them, heart thudding in his ears.

"Fuck," he muttered as the sight of them tailing him.

Julie closed her eyes, focusing. "There's more to our right." Jim passed another road, finding another black car. Probably 8 left after that crash involving Toni. Her breath came out shakily. "Turn left up here."

He did. "Julie..." Jim paused once he realized they'd turned down the road leading to Toni's car crash. "*Shit!*"

"Fuck!" she cried, slamming her hands on the dashboard.

Jim tried to swerve around the glass and the vehicles but the front quarter hit the back of one of the black cars. He was forced to stop then – blockaded by two citizen's cars stopped on the road before the accident, fearful looks in their eyes.

Quickly, Jim grabbed his gun, got out of the car. "Stay in the car," he instructed to Julie, but the woman was already getting out. "God *damn it*, stay in the *car*!"

There was no way Jim was getting out of this. He knew. The car wreck had two suited men getting out, aiming a gun at them. Toni's body lay motionless and Julie started sobbing again at the loss of her sister.

The blue Sedan pulled up but Hopper couldn't get a look at the driver and passenger because Julie was walking toward the car wreck.

"Don't hurt him," she spoke to the suited men who now aimed at her. "Take me. Don't. *Hurt*. Him."

"Jules, *stop*," Jim demanded, raising his gun at the men who started toward her. He shot. Twice. Both men collapsing, dead. Arms grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him down to the ground. He struggled to pull the trigger on the suited men, but one slammed his wrist down and Hopper felt a *pop* then white, hot pain shoot through his wrist. He yelled.

He sent a left hook to one of them then grabbed the gun again, shooting, blood splattering on his face.

"Jim!" Julie screamed. Hopper struggled to turn over then push himself to his feet.

A suited man had her around the waist, dragging her to the blue Sedan where another suited man stood facing the car wreck. Jim shot with his left hand, but his aim was shit and he missed while pain coursed through him again.

Julie was kicking and thrashing at the men who held him down, but it wasn't enough. They got her in the back of the car.

Jim shot two more times, hitting the one in the shoulder. Another car pulled up, having finally caught up to them. Gunshots were heard behind him and Jim ducked. Glancing back, he saw the two cars of citizens get shot up by approaching men.

Julie watched from the back of the Sedan, the grey-haired man who

took her staring silently. Two men approached Jim from behind, one hitting the butt of his gun against his head. Jim fell to the concrete and Julie screamed louder.

"Don't hurt him!" she hit her fists against the grey-haired man's chest. He caught her hands then nodded to the driver.

The car took off and Julie watched the suited men inject Jim with something, stilling him almost instantly.

"You've caused a lot of trouble, little bird," the man said.

"What'd you do to him?" she seethed.

"Won't you calm down?"

"What'd you *do* to him!?" she screamed, tears pouring down.

He sighed, pulling a syringe from his jacket pocket and injecting her neck as well. Julie's vision blurred and she felt the world shift from under her. Lightheaded, she slid down in the seat, felt her equilibrium give out, and before she knew it her head was in his lap.

"Just take a little rest. You'll be home in the morning," the grey-haired man stroked her hair.

The word '*home*' echoed in her mind as she slipped into darkness.



## 10. Incipient

Hopper came to with his head aching, stomach lurching, ears ringing, wrist throbbing. His vision was blurred and he blinked continuously, a slew of cuss words slipping from his mouth.

"Julie!"

When he could see clearly, he stopped moving. A motel. He was in a motel. Not handcuffed, no suited men hovering over him. He was alone. His gun was gone. His keys and wallet were still in his pocket.

Hopper busted out of the room, glancing around at the empty parking lot. Pat's car was parked in front of the room, black scuffs scraped across the front quarter – proving that this wasn't some *fucked up* dream.

Taking a look at the map, Hopper realized he wasn't even in the same damn town.

"Shit..."

...

Driving with a broken wrist wasn't the easiest thing he'd ever done, but he managed. Found his way back to familiar territory, went back to the scene, drove in circles, car radio off – found nothing. Not even a piece of glass on the road where Toni's car had been smashed.

Julie hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said these people were powerful. Had the manpower to get maybe fifteen vehicles together to manage that little stunt, cleaned up two bodies of unlucky citizens as well as Toni, got him put in a fucking motel room for the night sleeping off whatever they'd injected him with – yeah, they had power.

Alone on the road, Hopper ran a hand through his hair and sighed, crouching down beside the car.

Fuck.

...

Throwing his weight around as a police officer really wasn't helpful when he was this far out of his jurisdiction, but damn did he try. Went to the police station, asked about two citizens who'd been killed last night. Asked for plates, cleanup on that road, anyone report any suspicious activity of *fifteen fucking black cars* driving recklessly through the streets, or – Hell – *gunfire* sounding off at 9 in the morning.

Nothing. That town was useless.

...

Hopper drove back to the cabin, planning to stay two more days to pester the chief. Another blow up like that he'd get himself thrown in jail before sunset.

He'd been down the road twice, trying to figure out where the Hell the cabin was.

It couldn't have been that far from the crash, but it wasn't there. That grouchy old lady's house was the next plot of land over and he found *that* house with no problem, ditching the car in the gravel front. He'd run out of cigarettes, but he could use one as he stepped through the overgrown grass. Eyes squinted, he stopped mid-step.

The cabin wasn't standing anymore.

Judging by the wreckage, it'd been burned to the ground.

An empty ache settled itself between his third and fourth rib.

"*Shit!*" Hopper slapped his hands down on the hood of the car. Turning to glance at the old biddy's house, he wiped his lower lip and trudged through the grass, away from the cabin's wreckage.

Knocking several times, no one answered. "Hello?" Pausing a moment, he tried the handle, watching in surprise as it opened.

The house smelled like old people, mothballs, and death. Covering his nose, Hopper took a step in the kitchen to find the woman's body

on the floor.

A cold sweat crept up his back the moment he realized what was happening: what *power* these fuckers had. Burning down a house and killing witnesses...but leaving bodies...It had to be for him to find. They wouldn't leave a trail. This had to be some kind of warning – some insurance policy that *if* Jim chased, he'd end up like that grouchy old bitch.

Message received, loud and clear.

Didn't mean he had to listen.

Booking it out of the house, Hopper ran the address through his head before he made it to the car and took one glance back. Driving until he found a payphone, he called the cops, pretended to be a concerned family member, hung up before they asked too many questions.

The chief would no doubt mark him as suspicious. He'd be fucked if they came looking. Thankfully he hadn't spouted out much information, just demanded answers. And now a burned down house and a dead neighbor? Great.

Driving in silence, Hopper felt the ache in his wrist worsen. He needed to get a wrap for it for now, but he couldn't stop anywhere near the scene.

Slamming his hand on the steering wheel, Hopper yelled at no one in particular. He'd failed to keep Julie safe, got her sister killed. Just another tally against him, another mark that made him wonder why he even fucking did this job.

Pushing the thoughts down for a moment, he breathed and took in his next steps. He'd go to return Pat's scraped up shit-mobile. Swap it out with his squad car. Get back to Bloomington. Look into those hospitals. Get warrants to search them if need-be. He had to start somewhere.

...

The radio wasn't helping clear his thoughts.

Guilt sat like bricks in his chest cavity.

God, he felt cursed...

...

Maybe he should have waited for Pat to come back home. He was clearly out. And friends who fuck up friend's cars should probably stay to apologize or, yanno, *pay for it*. But he knew that garage wasn't locked and he knew Pat's habit of keeping keys in visors so he figured he'd give it a shot.

Keys right in the visor. Perfect.

He'd left a note about the scrape. He wasn't *that* much of an asshole. And maybe if he was feeling generous enough he'd send some money to get it repainted someday.

Or maybe not.

*"Didn't get it shot,"* the note said. *"We'll just call this even. You slept with my wife."*

...

"Jim, you got a call," Larks alerted him.

Cigarette hanging out of his mouth, he reached over his desk to answer the phone. Larks had given him parking duty for a straight month for disappearing like that. Maybe he should have told the truth about Julie – gotten them to investigate – but after what he'd seen, he didn't trust *anyone* with this. So he concocted some lie about a mental breakdown, a three day getaway to visit some *friend* of his in Nashville. Larks bought it. Didn't fire him for it.

"This is Hopper."

Irritation crept up his spine. He'd just been on his way out the door to Monroe Hospital in Bloomington. The phone call would give him less time to search the place. That warrant hadn't been easy to obtain.

"Hi, Jim?" a voice on the line broke him from his thoughts. "This is

Flo from Hawkins Police. We received your application."

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**Author's Note:** See you in the sequel: *This Close*. You can find it on my profile ;)